Universiteit Leiden
The Netherlands

To the source of an intellectual icon: being an account of an ethnological tour to the mouth of the Rhine, the headwaters of De Vliet, and the banished residence of Baruch Spinoza

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Citation

Gewald, J. B., & Dijk, R. A. van. (2026). To the source of an intellectual icon: being an account of an ethnological tour to the mouth of the Rhine, the headwaters of De Vliet, and the banished residence of Baruch Spinoza. In A. van Dokkum, A. Meckelburg, & S. LaTosky (Eds.), *ASCL occasional publications* (pp. 213-219). Leiden: African Studies Centre Leiden (ASCL). Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4307870

Version:	Publisher's Version
License:	Leiden University Non-exclusive license
Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4307870

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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To the Source of an Intellectual Icon: Being an account of an ethnological tour to the mouth of the Rhine, the headwaters of De Vliet, and the banished residence of Baruch Spinoza

In Honour of Prof. J. Abbink

Jan-Bart Gewald & Rijk van Dijk

> What altar of refuge can a man find for himself, when he commits treason against the majesty of reason (III/188).
>
> For the common people suppose they have satisfactorily explained something as soon as it no longer astounds them (III/84).
> *Spinoza, 1670, Theological Political Treatise (in Israel & Silverthorne, 2007)*

It was an overcast, wet, and blustery afternoon, the remnants of Storm Henk lashing the North Sea coast and pummelling the towns and villages that lay in the lee of the dunes that protected them from the death aquatic. It was the era of the Anthropocene, Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (The Decline of the West), the ever-continuing triumph of Huizinga's *puerilisme* (puerilism) at the end of the beginning of the endgame that heralded the collapse of *Homo Industriae* (Industrial Man), the end of the industrial age, and the beginning of a new era in human history.

We set off in a motor-coach from the railway station in Leiden. It is probable that sixty-four years previously, Albert Einstein set off on exactly the same trip to pay his respects to the memory of the man whom he venerated, and who adored the same god as he did. As Einstein put it, 'I believe in Spinoza's God, who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns himself with fates and actions of human beings' (cited in Calaprice, 2011, p. 325).

We drove along the Rijnsburgerweg skirting Oegstgeest, the leafy and prosperous village neighbouring Leiden, which for the second half of the twentieth century, when academics garnered respect and earned substantial salaries, was the home

for much of Leiden University's faculty. Past the A44 *Rijksstraatweg* highway that leads from The Hague to Amsterdam and into the *bollenstreek* (Bulb Area): the sandy reaches of west Holland that proved to be the ideal biotope for the country's tulip bulb production.

Tulips first arrived in the Netherlands from the Ottoman Empire in the late 1500s. Carolus Clusius, the botanist who established the *Hortus Botanicus* at Leiden University, planted them in his gardens where they thrived. By the 1630s tulips had become big business and at the very centre of the speculative bubble known as the Tulip Mania. Between 1634 and 1637 contract prices for tulip bulbs literally exploded, with single bulbs being sold at up to 4200 guilders, at a time when skilled craftsmen were earning 300 guilders a year. The tulip, along with windmills and clogs, still remains a symbol of the Netherlands. In essence the tulip is an apt illustration of the Dutch Golden Age (1588-1672), in which the Netherlands drew in people, goods, and ideas from elsewhere in the world, and then exported these at substantial profit. It was in the Golden Age that Spinoza's family settled in Amsterdam to escape the Portuguese Inquisition, and it was in Amsterdam that Baruch Spinoza was born in 1632.

In less than 20 minutes we had arrived in Rijnsburg, in the very heart of the *bollenstreek,* where Spinoza lived between 1661 and 1663. At an hour's walk away (5 Km), Rijnsburg was close to Leiden, but far away enough to escape the clamour of the town and the smell of rotting canals in the summer, and thus it became the site of country summer homes of faculty at Leiden University. In addition, Rijnsburg became the centre of the Remonstranten (Remonstrants), a faction of Dutch protestants who fell afoul of the synod of Dort (1618-1619).

Driving from Oegstgeest into Rijnsburg, we passed a large bronze monument to a *Landman*, a man in workman's clothing, leaning on a spade and staring across the fields.[1] Completed in 1973, the statue reflects the social-democratic sentiments of a substantial part of the Dutch population at the time. Arriving in Rijnsburg we alighted from the motor-coach at a traffic circle and set off on foot to our destination, the refuge of Spinoza in Rijnsburg. Our way was marked by bronze statues and large domineering protestant churches.

'De Grote Kerk' was built of sober brick after the reformation in 1577 upon the ruins of a Catholic abbey of Rijnsburg, which had been established by Petronilla of Saxony in 1134. At the foot of the church tower stands a statue cast in bronze of Count Floris V, known as *der keerlen god* (god of the guys, of the common chap).

1 <https://standbeelden.vanderkrogt.net/object.php?record=ZH48ad>.

Cast in bronze, wearing a crown and full armour, Count Floris brandishes a sword in his right hand whilst lifting his gauntleted left hand as a perch for an eagle. Floris V, epitomizes the Netherlands self-image and what it would like itself to be:

> He is credited with a mostly peaceful reign, modernizing administration, policies beneficial to trade, generally acting in the interests of his peasants at the expense of nobility, and reclaiming land from the sea.[2]

As befitting a recalcitrant Dutchman, he is said to have knighted forty peasants without permission of the church. These and other unverifiable stories subsequently inspired Dutch nationalist sentiments through the ages particularly during the *eighty years' war* (1568-1648) and thereafter.

Continuing down the Graaf Florislaan (Count Floris Lane), we passed an imposing building cast in red brick and fronted by yet another bronze statue mounted on a plinth of industrial concrete. The building was the public library of Rijnsburg. The statue was yet another statue of a working man, in this case that of a labourer wearing a flat cap and clogs, carting a wheelbarrow filled with horticultural detritus that may or may not represent tulips and the bulb industry of the area. The statue, in keeping once again with Dutch self-image, is entitled *De Pionier* and was completed in 1973 during the high days of social democratic sentiment in the Netherlands.

Crossing the Abdijlaan (Abbey Lane), we headed north till we reached the Vliet River. Turning west we followed the canalized river to its headwaters. So doing we passed yet another church, in this case the *Immanuëlkerk*. Which, in keeping with its religious sentiments was built of brick with an imposing bell-tower. In its formal proclamation to the general public, the church states:

> Our congregation situates itself in actuality of the Reformation and is a community that wants to be open, loving and serving to people inside and outside the church. We believe in God the Father and know that we are the church of Jesus Christ, whom we confess as Lord and Savior. We are guided by God's Spirit. We regard the Bible as the guiding word of God.[3]

Its members support youth churches in Malawi and is clearly thriving in what to all intents and purposes is a largely secular society.

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2 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Floris_V,_Count_of_Holland>.

3 <https://www.protestantsrijnsburg.nl/>.

Heading west along the Vliet River along the Rapenburg, we reached the source of the Vliet River. There at the source of the river a small statue, once again in bronze, of about 1 meter in height had been erected of Baruch Spinoza. The statue had been sponsored by the Netherlands largest cooperative agricultural bank, the Rabobank. It had been erected in 1993, twenty years after the *De Pionier* and reflects the change in public sentiment that had come about in the Netherlands at the dawning of the neoliberal age that would transform the country forever. Where *De Pionier* reflected an era in which social-democratic sentiments found general acceptance in the Netherlands, the statue of Spinoza erected in 1993 reflected a harshening of the political climate in the Netherlands. A political climate in which social solidarity, if expressed by a politician, was seen as a weakness, and the glorification of individual endeavour unfettered by the tethers of the state was seen as the highest good. Whereas the statues of the 1970s reflected public sentiment and were paid for with public funding, the statue of Baruch Spinoza was a private venture paid for by private capital.

Continuing west along the Rapenburg, we passed the epitome of poverty in the Netherlands, an *Action* supermarket, and entered a high-density suburb of social housing before entering the Spinozalaan. There, in the middle of Dutch suburbia we found a small house, a small building which 363 years ago had given Baruch Spinoza shelter when he had fled from Amsterdam. In Rijnsburg, Spinoza survived, through the kindness of Herman Homan, who was a surgeon at Leiden University. In a small room in the building Spinoza attempted to make a living for himself by grinding lenses and by teaching Cartesian philosophy (Nadler, 2018). Nadler indicates that students from Leiden, as well as Leiden professors, would travel to Rijnsburg specifically to talk to Spinoza about Cartesian philosophy. The house was known to be a meeting place of the *collegianten* (collegiants), a section of protestants with whom Spinoza associated. It was in these conditions that Spinoza worked on the philosophical works that would make him the philosophical hero of countless people around the world that have faced institutions and structures that have ranged from the oppressive to the totalitarian. It is striking to notice that, although the Spinoza house is almost invisible within the context of contemporary Rijnsburg and the Netherlands (thus physically it is overshadowed by social housing estates and socially it has been relegated to a quaint and unimportant folkloristic stopping point on cycle routes), it remains a shrine, a holy site (although they would vehemently deny this) for numerous people from around the world. A glance at the visitors' book at the Spinoza house shows pilgrims from around the world, from Iran to Japan, from Germany to Argentina. It is clear that Spinoza argues for and guides people through the ages, wherever they face repressive structures and institutions on planet Earth. Amongst those countless

thousands guided by the arguments and spirit of Spinoza is Prof. Jon Abbink, in whose working office a portrait of Spinoza has overlooked his working days.

Surely the position that Spinoza took in his day, in view of the dominant structures of power that he faced and critiqued, formed a basis of inspiration for Abbink's ethnographic studies and explorations. In a way Spinoza's critical and independent position vis-à-vis the powers that were (church, state, capitalist formations, emerging technocratic interventions, and taxonomic systems of governance) will undoubtedly have formed a lens through which Abbink recognized the same in the context of African (usually Ethiopian) nation-state developments. His inaugural lecture, delivered at the Free University, Amsterdam, in 2001 conveys this Spinoza-based interest. Specifically, Abbink explores the context within which, in the face of dominant structures, individuals can maintain their own independent, critical, non-submissive position, that might lead them to protest and rebel against such dominance, and to do so morally. He transposes this 'moral assignment' of individual's positioning to his analysis of the nation-state development on the African continent when he writes:

> Gezien het feit dat de Afrikaanse staat nog niet, zoals in de modern-industriële samenlevingen, de meeste waarden en normen via wetgeving heeft "'geannexeerd" en een systeem van *surveillance* (in Foucault's zin) heeft kunnen institutionaliseren, hanteren Afrikanen hun eigen normen en waarden als maatstaf voor de beoordeling van wat de staat doet. Op dit punt kan men leren van de Afrikaanse ervaring: als de staat [~~is~~] [deletion ours] een institutie wordt puur gericht op zelfhandhaving, machtsvorming zonder redelijke, publieke verantwoordelijkheid, en van burgers eist dat men de eigen positieve morele principes aan de kant zet, dan is er een legitiem argument voor weigering, subversie of rebellie. Deze Spinozistische positie is onlangs met gloed verdedigd door de filosofe Heidi Hurd, in haar inspirerende boek *Moral Combat* (1999]. Een menselijke subjectiviteit, gegrond in het recht om individuele, rationele keuzen te maken en in het respecteren van cultureel pluralisme dat zelf ook kan omgaan met verschillen, moet verdedigd worden tegen de combinatie een regime van mondiaal corporatief en media-kapitalisme en van uitdijende surveillance-achtige staatsmacht. (Abbink, 2001, p. 31) (citation represented without in-text footnotes)

English translation:

> Given that the African state has not yet, as in modern industrial societies, "'annexed" most values and norms through legislation and has not been able to institutionalize a system of *surveillance* (in Foucault's sense), Africans use their own norms and values as a yardstick for judging what the state does. Here one can learn

> from the African experience: when the state is or becomes an institution purely aimed at self-preservation, power-building without reasonable, public accountability, and demands that citizens set aside their own positive moral principles, then there is a legitimate argument for refusal, subversion or rebellion. This Spinozist position has recently been defended with ardor by the philosopher Heidi Hurd, in her inspiring book *Moral Combat* (1999). A human subjectivity, grounded in the right to make individual, rational choices and in respect for cultural pluralism that can itself deal with differences, must be defended against the combination of a regime of global corporate and media capitalism and of expanding surveillance-like state power. (Abbink, 2001, p. 31) (our translation, citation represented without in-text footnotes).

The ethnographic walking tour (see Urquijo, 2023) through Rijnsburg and into the house where Spinoza lived and worked is thus more than an academic pilgrimage to the shrine of an intellectual forebearer of independent thinking, of celebrating critical thinking, and of profoundly acknowledging the value of scientific exploration. The walking tour demonstrated how many of the dominant powers that Abbink addressed are and remain relevant; transferred and transformed from the times of Spinoza their visibility remains strong. The statues that we met transmitted the salience of persisting labour relations, the structures of exploration and exploitation that formed the basis of the economic structures that brought wealth to Rijnsburg, that produced mercantilism, a working class as well as middle and elite classes in its citizenry. In addition, the visibility of the religious power of the churches, although having lost much of their social basis due to the long years of rising secularism, are yet nevertheless centrally positioned in the lay-out of Rijnsburg's geography. Abbink (2001) entitled his inaugural lecture *Identiteit, strijd en continuïteit in trans-modern Afrika. Een kritisch-realistische benadering* ('Identity, Conflict and Continuity in Trans-modern Afrika. A Critical-Realist Approach', our translation) thus indicating firstly this 'time-lapse' experience that we also noted in our Rijnsburg ethnographic tour in view of how early-modernity's structures of dominance persist and transpose over time into different cultural contexts. But secondly it also draws attention to the critical realism of Spinoza's position on the significance of individual thought that Abbink recognizes and acknowledges in the African context of his ethnographic work. Critical realism does not deny the importance of structures and institutions of power, on the one hand, while it also does not reject the significance of ideology, the power of ideation, and the manner in which people may conceive of different realities, perceptually shape their lived-in worlds while metaphorically producing the lenses through which this world can be apprehended, on the other. Taking both of these as 'realities', critical realism aims to explore and understand how

individuals then deal with both worlds of structure and ideation in their own, conscious and critical ways. As Rees and Gatenby succinctly argue:

> As Davies notes, critical realism thus proposes a subtle and complex view of society in which human agents are neither passive products of social structures nor entirely their creators, but rather are 'placed in an iterative and naturally reflexive feedback relationship to them' (2008, p. 26). Ethnographic writing involves the adoption of intensive field-research observational practices, and a critical realist ethnography would seek to provide a grounded and contextualized account of 'how the social world works' (Watson, 2011), setting out from the premise that subjects' own accounts are the *starting point*, but not the end, of the research process. A critical realist ethnography would aim not only to describe events but also to *explain* them, by identifying the influence of structural factors on human agency. Specifically, its objective would be to elucidate the specific, contingent manner in which a certain mix of causal powers has been formed and activated. (Rees & Gatenby, 2014, p. 138)

To sum up, Spinoza remains relevant and will remain relevant. Jon Abbink admired Spinoza, and this is reflected in his work, and so it should. Spinoza stood for the power and moral responsibility of every individual to reflect on their position within the world and to take a stand.

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